

Unfolded History: Vico's Method of "Explication" as an Alternative to Enlightenment Rationalism

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Vico's theory of knowledge opposes mainstream Enlightenment ideas that emphasize the centrality of reason as a means to acquire knowledge. For Vico, the radical rationalism of the modern age preludes a new age of infernal barbarity, dominated by the "barbarism of reflection." The seeds of the "barbarism of reflection" are already contained in the analytical approach epitomized in the method of Descartes, which assumes that knowledge emerges from separating, distinguishing, and classifying. Such a method involves a form of thinking that inhibits the imagination and the creative power of thought and forces the human mind to dry and purely derivative processes. Vico's answer to the constraints of extreme rationalism lies in the epistemological method of "explication,"¹ or *spiegazione*, as he calls it in the *New Science*.

This paper will address the following points: 1. What *spiegazione* is, understood as both the method at the basis of the "new science" and the activity of thinking that is required for understanding history and the course of nations; 2. in what ways the method of explication differs from the analytical method of criticism; and 3. how *spiegazione* brings the imagination into play.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant introduces a distinction between two different modes of producing knowledge: definition—*Erklärung* or clarification—and explication—*explicatio*.² Kant maintains the relative superiority of clarification over explication, as the former allows one to determine a concept exactly and to define it within its limits, whereas the latter, which is limited to an empirical field of application, can never be exhaustive.

Kant gives the example of gold.³ This concept cannot be defined, he says, because whereas one person might think that one of the defining properties of gold is that it does not rust, another person might not include this among its characteristics. Such a concept, Kant argues, can only be “explicated.” Explication, thus, derives from the impossibility of setting clear and sufficient marks to define an object and is set against the notion of *Erklärung*, intended as a *definition* that expounds “a thing’s comprehensive concept originally within its bounds.”⁴

But if we consider the notion of “explication” from a different point of view, we can see how the absence of “secure boundaries” can turn out to be not only productive, but also decisive. *Explicatio* is creative and mimics the pattern of human thinking that is never confined within “secure boundaries” but is an ever-progressing activity. As a matter of fact, *explicatio* literally means “unfolding” and implies a constant movement forward, beyond the limits imposed by clarification/definition. Moreover explication involves the “making” of something new, since *ex-plicare* also means “to de-velop,” to create something new out of the embracing and interweaving of different things, out of a pleated tangle. If “definition” shows the truth in its nudity, Vico’s strategy is based on explication.

Spiegazione and *spiegare* are recurring terms in the *New Science*. The introduction, in which Vico presents the “idea of the work” through a detailed description of the *Dipintura*, is defined as a “*spiegazione*.” The adjectival past participle “*spiegata*” is referred to the “rational humanity” of the third age, when “human reason [is] fully developed,”⁵ where “*spiegata*” indicates the final stage in which a thing’s nature is revealed. Thus “*spiegare*” also indicates the movement of the human mind that opens up to comprehend—literally, to receive and to understand—things: “for when man understands [*con l’intendere*] he extends his mind [*spiega la sua mente*] and takes in [*comprende*] the things” (par. 405). Finally, the “metaphysical art of criticism” on which Vico founds his new science is in itself a process of explication: “the same metaphysical criticism of the history of the obscurest antiquity, that is, the *explanation* [*spiegazione*] of the ideas the earliest nations naturally formed” (par. 905). Indeed, for Vico the truth about the past is something that needs to be “explicated,” unfolded, like the etymological derivations he develops or the emblems that he unwraps into a narration.

As its etymology reveals, explication presupposes a fold, *plica*. The conceptual field delimited by the notion of the fold opens up the possibility of conceiving of realities that are shaped by a dynamic cumulative

process of transformation in which there is no dissipation but a constant re-gathering, or folding.⁶ This picture corresponds to Vico's vision of history as something that is gathered together with multiple pleats.⁷ In a way, for Vico, time does not flow; rather it saturates objects and circumstances. The fold and the notion of "*spiegazione*" apply to the idea of a pleated world, where continuity prevails over fracture and truth is layered and stratified.

Indeed, for Vico the sources of history—the "great fragments of antiquity," to use his own expression—are like clusters of temporal, spatial, and psychological condensation. A single fragment—a word, a myth, a fable—contains the traces of past times within manifold pleats. Embedded in a single fragment are the modifications of social practices and institutions as well as the ontogenetic changes of the *forma mentis* of human beings. In order to recover its meaning it is necessary to unravel the tangle into an explication.

An example of such an explication is found in the etymological *development*⁸ of the Latin word *lex*, "law," which contains within itself the different stages in the establishment of human institutions. "First [*lex*] must have meant a collection of acorns. Thence we believe is derived *illex*, as it were *illex*, the oak (as certainly *aquilex* means collector of waters); for the oak produces the acorns by which the swine are drawn together. *Lex* was next a collection of vegetables, from which the latter were called *legumina*. Later on, at a time when vulgar letters had not yet been invented for writing down the laws *lex* by a necessity of civil nature must have meant a collection of citizens, or the public parliament; so that the presence of people was the *lex*, or "law," that solemnized the wills that were made *calatis comitiis*, in the presence of the assembled *comitia*. Finally, collecting letters, and making, as it were, a sheaf of them for each word, was called *legere*, reading" (*NS* par. 240). The etymology of *lex* shows the successive displacements of sense that, in the process of explication, lead to the unfolding of human history. In the beginnings of humanity, when human beings still inhabited the forests and later on when they developed agriculture and animal husbandry, *lex* indicated the gathering of food, i.e., physical subsistence; when collectivities formed, *lex* became the expression of a social and civil intention; finally, in the refined age of the academies, *lex* came to mean "*lectura*," or reading, that is to say a practice of abstract thought.

Here a single word is "explicated" into a chain of interconnected meanings. As this example shows, Vico's main concern is not to restore

the proper derivation and root of the word; his etymological explication creates historical meaning by developing a temporal unfolding of social mutations. The kinetic movement of explication opens up what was contained in multiple pleats and organizes it into a narration whose progression replicates the temporal structure of what Vico calls “the order of civil institutions.” Explication does not simply make explicit what was implicit in the fold, but it generates new meaning by establishing relationships and connections between the different planes of the fold.

In this respect, the method of explication is diametrically opposed to what Vico calls the “studies of methods and criticism” to which most of his scholarly colleagues are dedicated.⁹ These scholars are trapped in a reflexive loop. Their critical method does not allow them to create meaning by “developing” it, because the rationalistic process is based on a strategy of analysis, separation, and distinction. In his *Second Response to the critics of his metaphysics*, Vico explains that criticism divides, selects, and isolates what has been collected, “*dall’ammassato divide e rimuove*”—it extracts from, divides and analyzes the tangle.¹⁰ Criticism corresponds to the arid mechanism of reason by which reality is dissected and atomized at the expense of the interrelatedness of things. Above all, clarity and distinctness for Vico do not produce new knowledge; they make manifest what is already in the “tangle” (“*l’ammassato*”), but they do not establish new, unexpected connections. These methods waste the *intendimento* whose office is “to see the wholeness of each thing and to see it all together. . . . In order to see a thing in its wholeness, the intellect must consider each thing under all the relationships that it may have with all the rest of the universe and find instantly some commonness based on reason between the thing to be perfectly understood and all the other things totally dissimilar or most remote.”¹¹

In the *New Science* of 1730, in his address to the young reader, Vico implicitly argues for this kind of synthetic approach when he recommends that the former should have “*una mente comprensiva*,”¹² an associative mind that is able to unite and make sense of the most disparate things: “*e perciò ti bisogna meditare più addentro le cose; e col combinarle vieppiù vederle in più ampia distesa*”—you must meditate upon things in depth and by combining them you’ll be able to see them in a broader expanse, “*distesa*.”¹³ This passage defines Vico’s strategy of explication: to descend into the fold, to find and combine what is gathered there and bring it into view in what is finally a “*distesa*,” an “expanse” and no longer a “pleated tangle.” This suggests a disclosure, or better a

construction of meaning that takes place by connecting things and ideas into an extended narrative form.

As Donald Phillip Verene has highlighted, the narration is the philosophical method that enables Vico himself, and the reader of the *New Science* with him, to express the course of history into an intelligible and complete speech, or *fabula*.¹⁴ "*Spiegare*" is an unfolding of meaning into a narration. But the notion of explication also suggests the possibility of a final moment of "illumination." As Vico himself suggests, by following the explication of the new science "*si avrà tutta spiegata la storia*" (*NS* par. 1096). The 1744 *New Science* culminates into a literal "unfolding" of human history, which leaves the reader to contemplate "this world of nations in all the expanse [*distesa*] of its places, times, and varieties" (par. 345). This "*distesa*," a temporal and spatial unfolding, is the final outcome of the "*spiegazione*"; it is the moment of the *explicatio* of sense that lends itself to contemplation. "*Spiegare*" also means to "lay open to the view, to display." As suggested by the two visual verbs—*see* and *contemplate*—that Vico uses in reference to the "*distesa*," the explanation produces an image, almost a visual tale "of the course [that] the nations run" whose ultimate purpose is to engage the imagination.

The place of images in Vico's work has been widely discussed by critics, especially in relation to the emblematic character of the *New Science*.¹⁵ In this context, I want to call attention to the iconographic quality that Vico attributes to explication. The chapter on the "Epitomes of Poetic Wisdom" in the *New Science* contains a significant instance of the visual layering of time and meaning: the shield of Achilles, in which "more full [*piena*] and detailed [*spiegata*] . . . is the history of the world" (par. 681). Vico explains that the images chiseled onto the shield offer a graphic condensation of the "history of the [heroic] world" in all its "fullness." In four numbered paragraphs, he illustrates the different scenes through a detailed narration that extends from the creation of the world through the formation of families to the emergence of the arts. The narrative describing the engraved scenes follows their circular disposition around the shield. Thus, the movement of *explication* goes from the image to the narrative and back to the image. At the end of the explication, the reader is confronted once again with the image of the chiseled shield, whose narrative implications are now fully exposed.¹⁶

Vico's historical ekphrasis of the shield recalls the interpretive movement that the reader of the *New Science* is called to perform at the end of the book. In the "Practic of the New Science," an appendix that Vico had

planned to add to his work to illustrate the practical aspects of his theory, he urges the readers who want to comprehend the full import of his new science, to contemplate “the course the nations run,” the course of history.¹⁷ This practice, he explains, “requires of us that, from these human times of acute and intelligent minds in which we are born, we should here at the end look back [*guardare a rovescio*] to the picture that was placed at the beginning.”¹⁸ The *dipintura* is expressly designed to be impressed upon the mind of the reader. It is a mnemonic device that the reader can use both at the beginning of the book to gather the general sense of Vico’s work and at the end as a memory aid for recalling what he has read. But it is also a visual synopsis of the *New Science* itself. It contains—so to speak—the entire story of the social world as reconstructed by Vico. Like Achilles’ shield, however, it is opaque to direct interpretation and needs to be explained. For the image to become meaningful, it is necessary to turn it into a story—a *fabula*—that illustrates and establishes connections between the elements contained in the space of the picture, i.e., the hieroglyphs and the other figurative features of the *dipintura*. The resulting narrative articulates the relationships between the different stages of social development and makes the picture historically intelligible. Thus, the *explication* of the *dipintura*—which is, in fact, the entire narrative of the *New Science*, and not just the initial “*spiegazione*”—gives the *dipintura* historical depth—or rather, length, since it articulates in time the simultaneities of the picture.

In order to refer back to the initial etching, the reader needs to go through the book backwards, to follow once again the explicated text and reflect on its development, which mimics the movement of history itself. The final act of comprehension takes place by contemplating “*tutta spiegata la storia*.” The *New Science* has given the reader a full view of history, that is to say, a “*distesa*” in which time is unfolded and arrested, exactly as in a picture. In this standstill it is possible to grasp the fundamental interconnections between the present and the past and to “imagine” the future, i.e., to recognize a pattern of development that can be extended indefinitely. Such is the result of explication, since, as an ever-progressing activity of comprehension, it can never be exhausted as in a mere definition. The end of the book gives the reader a vantage point from which he can see, clearly explicated, the succession of *corsi* and *ricorsi*—it is almost a super-historical perspective from which the actual facts of the civil world come to be seen as parts of an eternal providential design.

The *Dipintura*, which comes to coincide with the beginning and the end of the narrative of the *New Science*, represents both the idea—the point of origin from which the process of explication departs—and the outcome—the moment in which the truth that has been “developed” is finally shown to the reader, “laid open to his view.” The explication lends the initial image a meaning, transforming the metaphor into articulated language. But it also leads the reader to conjure up a “mental image” of the *New Science*, which, by the end, he is openly invited to contemplate. In other words, by reflecting on the “*spiegazione*,” the reader is urged to apprehend the theory—*theorein*, to see—of the new science, which he will be then called on to put into practice.

In conclusion, explication is never divorced from language. It is rooted in the narrative process, in that it finds the truth by composition, by constructing a narrative that actively attempts to bind things together. As a “synthetic” method, it appears to be an implicit critique of Cartesian criticism and the analytical method. Vico’s “*nova Critica*” is based on the belief that knowledge does not emerge from splitting, but from creatively uniting and combining scattered elements. The “new art of criticism,” as Vico explains in the *First New Science*, is also a method whose function is to clarify things, as much as the Kantian *Erklärung*: it “serves as a torch by which to discern what is true in obscure and fabulous history.”¹⁹ To “explicate” means to attempt to create a *fabula* out of the “various species of men, deeds, or things” (*NS* par. 210) that have been concealed in the folds of history. The “*spiegazione*” brings to light the things of the past and, by comparing and connecting them into a continuous narration, it rediscovers them and finds new revelatory relations. In this respect, it is also fundamentally a topical art, in the sense in which, for Vico, topics departs from perception and the visual image and “*ritruova ed ammassa*”—discovers things and collects them. It is a fertile method, based on the inventive, imaginative power of human thought.²⁰

Explication connects “inventively” the different *logoi* of human eras enabling us to understand the past with “*una mente comprensiva*,” but it also extends a bridge between theory and praxis, idea and language, and human time and ideal eternal history. Ultimately, it shows history as a whole, completely unfolded and bound together by a unifying *logos*—“the language spoken by the ideal eternal history”—that harmonizes the “*diversiloquia*” (*NS* par. 210) of history.

NOTES

1. To translate the Italian “*spiegazione*” I have chosen the term “explication” rather than the more obvious explanation, both because it preserves the etymological connotations of the original and because by calling attention to the process rather than the final outcome, it focuses on the dynamic activity of production of meaning and on the temporal movement of *explicatio*.

2. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), 679–82 (A728–732/B756–B760).

3. Ibid., 679 (A728/B756).

4. Ibid.

5. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Unabridged trans. of the 3d ed. (1744), with the addition of the “Practice of the New Science,” trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), par. 326.

6. In *Le pli. Leibniz et le Baroque* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988), Gilles Deleuze develops an elaborate theory of the fold, which he uses as a model for illustrating both the worldview and the epistemological approach that characterize the Baroque. The concept of the fold applies to a reality that is perceived as manifold and in continuous variation; in this sense it is the Baroque’s response to and implicit criticism of the Cartesian view of space and matter.

7. See Michel Serres’s idea of temporal percolation, in *Rome: The Book of Foundations*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991) and Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). According to Serres it is possible to think of objects and events as temporally layered and carrying within themselves the traces of different moments and eras: “An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats” (*Conversations*, 60).

8. For Vico, the etymological method is both genetic and hermeneutic. By tracing the displacement of the meaning of a lemma over time, the etymological system generates historical meaning. Etymology uncovers the past: In *The Constancy of the Jurisprudent*, Vico argues for “a new etymological dictionary that will bring to light countless things that languish in the darkness of antiquity which now scarcely anyone, or no one, could know” (trans. John D. Schaeffer, *New Vico Studies* 23 [2005]: 154). On this topic see especially Andrea Battistini, “Vico e l’etimologia mitopoietica,” *Lingua e stile*, 1 (1974): 31–66, and Battistini’s contribution to the “Seminario interdottrale: Fortuna della teoria aristotelica della metafora,” “L’ermeneutica genetica di metafora, mito ed etimologia nel pensiero antropologico di Vico,” *Scuola Superiore di Studi Umanistici, Università degli Studi di Bologna*, 14 January 2007.

9. "Letter of 12 January 1729, to Francesco Saverio Estevan," trans. G. A. Pinton, *New Vico Studies* 16 (1998): 49.

10. *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians, Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 180. On the difference between Cartesian rationalism and Vico's rhetorical philosophy, see Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), esp. 35–67. Grassi discusses this same passage to show the preeminence of "inventive philosophy" as opposed to "rational philosophy."

11. "Letter of 12 January 1729, to Francesco Saverio Estevan," trans. G. A. Pinton, *New Vico Studies* 16 (1998): 49.

12. *New Science [1730]*, ed. Giuseppe Ferrari (Naples: Stamperia de' Classici Latini, 1859), 29.

13. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

14. On Vico and the idea of narration as a philosophical method and a form of knowledge, see, especially, Donald Phillip Verene, "Imaginative Universals and Narrative Truth," *New Vico Studies* 6 (1988): 1–19 and "The New Art of Narration: Vico and the Muses," *New Vico Studies* 1 (1983): 21–38. See also, Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

15. See Paolo Rossi's *Le sterminate antichità: Studi vichiani* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1969) and Mario Lanza's *Saggi di poetica vichiana* (Varese: Magenta, 1961). For an analysis of the *dipintura*, see Mario Papini, *Il geroglifico della storia: Significato e funzione della dipintura nella 'Scienza nuova' di G. B. Vico* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1984); and Papini, *Arbor humanae linguae: L'etimologico di G. B. Vico come chiave ermeneutica della storia del mondo* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1984); and Margherita Frankel, "The 'Dipintura' and the Structure of Vico's *New Science* as a Mirror of the World," in *Vico: Past and Present*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), 43–51. See also, for an analysis of the *impresa* on the *frontespizio* of the *New Science*, Donald Phillip Verene, "Vico's 'Ignota latebat'," *New Vico Studies* 5 (1987): 77–98.

16. In *Il geroglifico della storia*, Papini connects the circularity of Achilles' shield to the unfolding of a Providential and universal design as conveyed by the *Dipintura*. In another context, and similar to this essay of mine, he draws the connection between unfolding and *explicatio* in his analysis of Vico's visual hermeneutic in "A Graph for the Dipintura," *New Vico Studies* 9 (1991): 138–41. In his analysis of the *dipintura*, Papini explains the "*spiegazione*" of the "idea of the work" as "a tensional *explicatio*, a progressive unfolding of everything that is closed inside that 'zero' point, which impends over Metaphysics and is opposed to bright Providence" (141). According to him the "*spiegazione*" is a graphical demonstration of the continuous creative tension of the human *conatus*. While my interpretation finds that the explication is essentially a narrative and sees the image as a rhetorical device.

17. “Practic of the New Science,” trans. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch, in *New Science* (1984): par. 1406.

18. Ibid.

19. *The First New Science*, par. 391; trans. Leon Pompa, in *Vico: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 154.

20. In stressing Vico’s rhetorical hermeneutics and the idea of imaginative speech, both Verene and Grassi highlight the fact that for Vico the creative power of language resides in the metaphor, which, as a figure, supplies the starting point for any movement of thought. On this topic see Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy*; Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico’s Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981) and Verene, “Vico’s History,” *New Vico Studies* 22 (2004): 1–14.